

JOHN BREUNER AND COMPANY BUILDING  
1515 Clay Street  
Oakland  
Alameda County  
California

HABS No. CA-2296

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**PHOTOGRAPHS**

**WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA**

Historic American Buildings Survey  
National Park Service  
Western Region  
Department of the Interior  
San Francisco, California 94102

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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JOHN BREUNER AND COMPANY BUILDING

HABS No. CA-2296

Location: 1515 Clay Street  
Oakland  
Alameda County  
California

U.S.G.S. Oakland West Quadrangle (7.5') , Topographical  
Universal Transverse Mercator Coordinates:  
10.564080/4184365

Present Owner: U.S. Government  
General Services Administration  
525 Market Street  
San Francisco, California

Present Occupant: Vacant.

Present Use: None. Scheduled to be demolished January 1991.

Significance: The John Breuner and Company building is an excellent surviving example of early skyscraper design dating from a period when Oakland's downtown experienced a dramatic transformation subsequent to the 1906 earthquake. The building contributes to a largely intact and architecturally unified downtown district representative of a significant period in the development of Oakland's downtown between 1907 and 1929. During this period, a new urban downtown of skyscrapers and department stores constructed of masonry and steel replaced the old downtown of small wood-frame buildings.

Arthur J. Mathews, the architect of the John Breuner and Company building, played a significant role in the development of Oakland's downtown. He designed Oakland's first skyscraper, the 1904 Union Savings Bank, in addition to many other important Oakland buildings during the early twentieth century.

Founded in Sacramento in 1856, John Breuner and Company is one of the oldest furniture businesses in California. John Breuner and Company opened what was their second store in Oakland in 1907, and they moved their store to 1515 Clay Street in 1917. This building was their only Bay Area store during their fourteen years at this location. John Breuner and Company (known today as "Breuners") played a significant role in Oakland's economic history as a major downtown retailer until 1975.

**PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION**

**A. Physical History**

1. Date of erection: Building permit #41930 was issued for 1515 Clay Street on May 19, 1916. The building was occupied during 1917. Building permit # 87350 was issued for the annex building at 570 15th Street on January 17, 1924.

2. Architects: 1515 Clay Street: Arthur J. Mathews  
570 15th Street: Reed and Corlett

Walter J. Mathews was one of Oakland's most prominent and prolific architects during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Mathews father, Julius, came to San Francisco from Wisconsin in 1852 engaged in the mercantile business. He returned to his family in a couple of years, but eventually moved his family to Oakland in 1866. Walter Mathews first developed an interest in architecture working for his father who had started an architectural firm in Oakland. In 1886, Walter Mathews opened his own office where he maintained his practice for almost fifty years.

During the 1890s, Mathews served as Oakland's City Architect and he designed a number of buildings for the city. In 1904, Mathews designed Oakland's first skyscraper, the Union Savings Bank building at 1300 Broadway. According to a 1916 account in The Observer, when first built, the Union Savings Bank "stood majestic and alone among business structures that lined Broadway—frame structures mostly of the vintage of the seventies or earlier." The December 22, 1904 Oakland Herald described the Union Savings Bank as "Oakland's only skyscraper...an ornament to the City and ahead of any other edifice in Oakland." This eleven story building was the first of a series of evenly spaced skyscrapers along Broadway that would define Oakland's future skyline.

Mathews was one of the most important architects who established the character of downtown Oakland during the construction boom that ensued during the decade after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. During this period, Mathews designed the Central National Bank, the Bacon Block, and the Blake and Moffit building, in addition to being the consulting architect for the Oakland Hotel and the Oakland Auditorium. Mathews maintained his office at 927 Broadway in downtown Oakland until 1934; he died in 1947 at the age of 97. According to his grandson, Stanley Johnson, none of his office files have survived.

The four story annex to the John Breuner and Company building on 15th Street dates from 1924 and was designed by the firm of Reed and Corlett. The architects Walter Reed and William Corlett designed more buildings in downtown Oakland during the 1920s than any other firm, and thus had a major impact on the character of downtown during this period.

There are still ten extant buildings by Reed and Corlett in downtown Oakland, including the original Safeway headquarters and the Oakland Bank Tower.

3. **Original and Subsequent Owners:** Legal description, 1515 Clay Street: Commencing at a point by the intersection of the Northerly line of 15th Street with the Westerly line of Clay Street; thence running Northerly along said Westerly line of Clay Street 103 feet, 9 inches; thence at right angles Westerly and parallel with said line of 15th Street 100 feet; thence at right angles Southerly and parallel with said line of Clay Street 103 feet, 9 inches, to said Northerly line of 15th Street; and thence Easterly along said last mentioned line 100 feet to the said Westerly line of Clay Street and the point of beginning. Being Lots Nos. 7 and 8 in Block No. 267, as said lots and block are delineated and so designated upon that certain map entitled, "Map of the Casserly Tract on Fourteenth Street, Oakland", filed July 23, 1869 in the office of the County Recorder of Alameda County.

The Charles Jurgens Company was the original owner and developer of 1515 Clay Street in 1917. Charles Jurgens was a German immigrant who came to Oakland in 1863. After operating a grocery business for several years, Jurgens started developing both residential and commercial buildings in 1876. Jurgens built some of the earliest brick commercial buildings in downtown Oakland, including the Globe Hotel at 13th and Broadway, one of Oakland's first major hotels. The John Breuner Company leased the building during their occupancy (1917-1931) and never held title to the property. Between 1931 and 1948, numerous commercial enterprises owned the building. The United States Government purchased the building from the Capital Company on April 15, 1948.

Legal description, 570 15th Street: Beginning at a point on the northerly line of 15th Street, distant thereon 100 feet westerly from the north westerly corner of the intersection of 15th Street and Clay Street; thence, westerly, along the northerly line of 15th Street, a distance of 50 feet to a point; thence, at right angles northerly, a distance of 103.75 feet to a point; thence, at right angles easterly, a distance of 50 feet to a point; thence, at right angles southerly, a distance of 103.75 feet to the beginning; being Lot 9 in Block 267, as said Lot and Block are shown on the "Map of Casserly Tract on 14th Street, Oakland", filed July 23, 1869, in the office of the county Recorder of Alameda County.

The owner/developer of the annex was Arthur E. Corder who had built the first Breuner's Store at 13th and Franklin Streets. Arthur Corder was the son of Thomas Corder who came to California in 1854. Corder started a wool business in 1870 which his son took over after his retirement. Breuners may have also been a customer of Corder's wool business for the manufacture of their furniture. The United States Government purchased the annex building on January 16, 1948 from the Corder Company.

4. **Builders, contractors:** 1515 Clay Street: Louis Schulman  
570 15th Street: Percival J. Walker

The contractor of the annex, Percival J. Walker, was a native of Oakland born in 1875. Mr. Walker's firm played an important role in the reconstruction of San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake. According to the 1915 Press Reference Library, "in Oakland, Mr. Walker's company has constructed practically every important building there in recent years."

**5. Original Plans and Construction:** The original building plans and permits for 1515 Clay Street are on file with the City of Oakland, Development Services Department, One City Hall Plaza, Oakland, CA 94612. The building permit, #41930, was issued May 19, 1916 for an estimated construction cost of \$180,000.

The Oakland Museum History Department has in its photo collection a partial view of the Clay Street front (photo #57A) dating from the 1920s when the Breuner Company still occupied the building and when the building had its original windows. There are also two views in the collection of the building site before construction when it was used as parking lot (photos # 222 and 670).

The original plans for 1515 Clay Street show that remodeling of the exterior has been largely limited to the ground and mezzanine floor levels. The exterior windows and projecting cornice were removed from both the Clay and 15th Street elevations in December, 1989 because of damage resulting from the October, 1989, Loma Prieta earthquake. The ground floor was originally almost entirely large fixed panes of glazing to maximize the visibility of the furniture showroom to the passing shopper. The main building entrance was a pair of double doors (with transoms above) centered on the Clay Street elevation; an ornamental marquise projected above the main entrance. The mezzanine level was accentuated by pairs of horizontal windows framed along the sides and top by glazed terra cotta rosettes. The rosettes also continued down the corner columns framing the entire ground floor on the Clay Street elevation. The rosettes also enframed the delivery entrance and covered the corner column on the 15th Street elevation. The original concrete delivery entrance (28 feet wide by 24 feet deep) served the first floor loading platform that continued back into the building another 81 feet.

The upper floors of the building originally had paired double hung windows along the street frontages; the second floor window openings were taller than the remaining floors and sported transoms. Above the 8th floor at roof level the projecting pressed-metal cornice had modillion blocks (framed in architrave mouldings) set above a continuous egg and dart moulding.

The building was primarily used for the display of furniture therefore the interior layout was of an open-plan design. However, the first and mezzanine floors had rooms indicated as a small office and rest rooms. The first floor enclosed delivery area opened vertically into the mezzanine level. An opening approximately 40 x 60 feet created a continuous space between the mezzanine and the ground floor. The building originally had a small passenger elevator adjacent to a narrow stair along the north wall; the freight elevator next

to the loading platform along the west wall is about 10 x 12 feet. The building was originally heated by a central steam heat system located in the basement.

The permit for the annex at 570 15th Street is also on file with the City of Oakland, Development Services Department. Permit #87350 for the annex was issued January 17, 1924 at projected construction cost of \$103,000. The original plans for the annex have not been located.

6. Alterations and additions: The four story annex at 570 15th Street dates from 1924. The design of the annex building closely matches the design of the main building.

Between 1953 and 1972, a series of major remodelings of 1515 Clay Street and 570 15th Street undertaken by the United States Government removed all evidence of the building's original interior, including mechanical systems, stairs and elevators. Plans documenting the remodelings are on file with the General Services Administration in San Francisco and at the City of Oakland Development Services Department.

During a 1963 remodeling, brick facing replaced the original glazed terra cotta on the exterior ground floor columns and large fixed-pane, dark anodized aluminum windows replaced the ground floor windows. At this time the original central entrance on Clay Street was removed, a new entrance lobby at the north end of the building and a new entrance on 15th Street were created.

In 1965, the original double-hung wood windows on the upper floors were replaced with fixed sash, aluminum frame windows. Plans for this exterior remodeling are on file with the General Services Administration in San Francisco.

The new windows and the metal roof cornice were removed in December, 1989 due to damage resulting from the October, 1989, Loma Prieta earthquake.

## **B. Historical Context**

Before the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the commercial buildings in downtown Oakland were largely modest two or three story, wood frame structures. The devastation in San Francisco resulting from the earthquake and fire led to over 150,000 people fleeing to the East Bay where the damage was less extensive than in San Francisco. Many of the evacuees eventually became permanent residents, creating a population boom that precipitated an equally dramatic construction boom. From 1900 to 1910, Oakland's population increased from 67,000 to 150,000. During the ten year period after the earthquake, Oakland issued 38,910 building permits, including 13,716 for new houses. Downtown Oakland also saw an unprecedented building boom, as seven to ten story

skyscrapers and large department stores replaced the nineteenth century wood frame buildings of the pre-1906 downtown.

The City Hall area became the focus of downtown retail development when Taft and Pennoyer opened Oakland's first department store at 14th and Clay Streets in 1909. During the next five years, a number of other major furniture and department stores opened in this area. Jackson Furniture and the Sherman & Clay Company (selling pianos and victrolas) occupied the block between 13th and 14th Streets on Clay Street, the Kahn Department Store opened at 15th and Broadway and the H.C. Capwell Department Store opened at 13th and Broadway.

The three major department stores that had opened since 1909 had over ten acres of floor space. By 1917, there were seven furniture stores on Clay Street between 11th and 15th Streets. Oakland also opened its new fifteen story City Hall in 1913 on the block of Broadway between 14th and 15th Streets. Several new skyscrapers were also built along Broadway during this period. By 1915, Werner Hegemann in his City Plan for the Municipalities of Oakland and Berkeley described the section of Clay Street in the vicinity of City Hall as a "high grade shopping street" and as a street that has "made a rapid start towards becoming an ideal shopping street somewhat like Grant Avenue in San Francisco." Downtown Oakland had become the retail hub of the East Bay with stores that featured a type and variety of goods unavailable anywhere else in the area.

When John Breuner and Company moved their furniture store to 1515 Clay Street (from their first Oakland building at 14th and Franklin Streets) in 1917, the shift of downtown Oakland's center of retail activity to the Broadway and Clay Street area was well established. The development and early history of the John Breuner and Company building involved a number of people who played significant roles in the history of downtown Oakland. In addition to being important to Oakland's economic history, the building's first occupants, John Breuner and Company, traces its origins as a business back to the California Gold Rush.

Of German birth, John Breuner immigrated to the United States during the 1840s. Breuner originally worked as a cabinetmaker in Cincinnati, which he left in 1852 to try his luck in the California gold fields. When mining turned out to be less profitable than expected, Breuner made mining cradles and other equipment which he sold to his fellow miners. As gold fever waned, Breuner eventually put his cabinetmaking skills to work making furniture. In 1856, Breuner opened one of the first furniture stores in California in downtown Sacramento to meet the needs of a growing, but now more stable, local population. Although his store was destroyed several times by fires and floods, Breuner's furniture business survived and eventually prospered. In 1868, Breuner built 120 handcrafted desks for use in the California State Senate, these desks are still in use today (1990). Although the company has grown into being one of the largest home furnishing

companies in the United States, Breuner's descendants have continued to be involved in the company's management.

When John Breuner died in 1890, his son Louis took over the business. Louis opened the second Breuner's store in Oakland in 1906 after the earthquake and fire destroyed San Francisco. Oakland's first Breuner's furniture store at 13th and Franklin Streets began by providing furniture to those who lost their homes in the disaster. Business grew over the next decade and Breuners moved to 1515 Clay Street in 1917, a building over twice the size of their first store. By 1931, Breuners moved once again to a larger building at 21st Street and Broadway, an area that had become the primary retail district in downtown Oakland. In their new location, Breuners continued to be an important force in downtown Oakland. At the opening of the 1931 store, the President of the Oakland Chamber of Commerce, C.J. Stuble, noted that "ever since 1906, the Breuner family has been closely affiliated with the business life and development of the City of Oakland."

Beginning in the 1930s, many buildings in the City Hall area that were originally retail were converted into government offices. The Federal government moved several different agencies into the John Breuner and Company building in 1933, including the Land Bank of Berkeley and the Farm Credit Administration, but they did not buy the building until 1948.

After the purchase, the Veterans Administration occupied the building and the annex. During the 1960s, the building became an Army induction center and subsequently became the focus of many anti-war demonstrations during the Vietnam conflict.

## **PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION**

### **A. General Statement**

1. Architectural character: The John Breuner and Company building is a good example of what was, in 1916, the latest design ideals for skyscrapers as practiced by the Chicago School. The skeletal articulation of the facade and its restrained classical ornament are characteristic of this Style. The building's original design had particularly fine proportions in its three part vertical composition with the base and top floor well defined by bands of glazed terra cotta ornament. With its prominent corner location, the design complemented its neighboring buildings of similar materials, composition and architectural details.

2. Condition of fabric: The exterior brick and terra cotta trim are in good condition. All windows and the ornamental metal cornice on the street elevations have been removed. The main building and the annex sustained structural damage during the October, 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and will be demolished in January 1991.



**B. Description of Exterior**

**1. Overall dimensions:** 1515 Clay Street was originally almost square in plan, 101 feet 3 inches along Clay Street (five bays, 20 feet 3 inches each), and 97 feet 6 inches along 15th Street (five bays, 19 feet 6 inches each). The annex has the same depth as the original structure and added 39 feet (two and one-half bays) to the 15th Street elevation. The original building includes a basement, ground floor, mezzanine, and seven upper floors. The annex has a basement, ground floor, mezzanine and four upper floors.

**2. Foundations:** Reinforced concrete footings.

**3. Walls:** The south and east elevations are faced primarily in variegated brown pressed brick with brown glazed terra cotta trim. A wide band of terra cotta rosettes and a beltcourse moulding separates the mezzanine floor from the second floor; the annex replicates the rosettes and beltcourse of the main building in painted pressed metal rather than terra cotta. The rosettes are set in alternating square and circular panels below an enriched talon moulding. The exterior piers are highly articulated against the recessed spandrels.

Projecting terra cotta window sills with a beaded moulding accentuates the horizontal line of the spandrels between the 2nd and 7th floors. The spandrels between the 7th and 8th floors are more richly ornamented with a top egg and dart moulding and a simple cyma moulding running along the bottom of the spandrel. The vertical piers at this level have fluted capitals adjacent to the spandrels further accentuating the top floor from the floors below. At the 8th floor the piers are decorated with elaborate cartouche panels. Another cyma moulding separates the top of the 8th floor windows from the plain brick banding just below where the projecting metal cornice was attached.

The north and west rear elevations are sheathed with unadorned hollow terra cotta building tiles. The tile are set in mortar, have steel reinforcing bars running vertically and are typically back-filled with concrete.

**4. Structural system:** Framing is structural steel, unbraced, steel columns are sheathed with hollow terra cotta tile for fire proofing; reinforced concrete is used for floors and roof.

**5. Openings:** All original windows and doors have been removed or remodeled. Six piers create five bays on the Clay Street and 15th Street fronts. Each bay is further divided into paired openings between the piers and spandrels. A pair of double hung windows filled each bay originally - the dimensions of the square lights in the windows replicated the width of the piers and spandrels, so that the building was essentially designed based on a module derived from the original window size. The pier separating each pair of windows is equal to one-half the width of one window. The window opening on the third floor is larger because on this floor there was a third window above the standard one over

one double-hung windows which filled the openings on floors 3 through 8. The existing opening for the sidewalk elevator on 15th Street was part of the original design for the delivery entrance.

6. Roof: Flat roof, with built-up tar membrane.

**C. Description of Interior**

1. Floor Plans: Existing floor plan consists primarily of small to medium size offices delineated by floor-to-ceiling movable partitions and walls. All interior partitions and fixtures appear to date from the 1970s and 1980s.

2. Stairways: All original stairways have been removed. Existing stairways are of a standard steel and concrete type dating from a 1960s remodeling.

3. Flooring: Floors throughout the building have been covered with vinyl, asphalt or carpet flooring dating from the 1970s and 1980s.

4. Wall and ceiling finish: No original wall or ceiling finishes have survived the numerous remodelings. Current conditions are suspended acoustic tile ceiling systems with integral fluorescent lighting. Walls are covered with wall board and painted.

**5. Openings:**

a. Doorways: All doorways have been remodeled since the 1960s and use flush doors.

b. Windows: Window sill mouldings and frames are original on floors 3 through 8. The sill has a simple architrave moulding and the frames are simple flat boards.

6. Mechanical Equipment: Modern forced air heating, ventilating and air conditioning system. All the plumbing and electrical systems have been modernized within the last twenty years.

**D. Site**

1. General setting and orientation: The orientation of the building was determined by the street grid in this area of downtown Oakland. The front elevation on Clay Street faces east and the 15th Street side elevation faces south. The building is immediately northeast of the Oakland City Hall. The topography of the site and immediate vicinity is flat. Other buildings in the immediate area are primarily residential hotel and apartment buildings

contemporary to 1515 Clay Street, having been erected largely between 1910 and 1928. The west side of Clay Street between 15th and 17th Streets has two, unbroken blocks of early twentieth century buildings that are reasonably intact and similar in scale.

Across the street from 1515 Clay Street occupying the block of Clay Street between 14 th and 15 th Streets is the annex to Oakland City Hall; this building, substantially remodeled in the 1950s, was originally the Taft and Pennoyer Department Store from 1909. There are other government offices and several small office buildings in the vicinity. The buildings east of Clay Street (toward San Pablo Avenue) tend to have ground floor retail, while those west of Clay Street do not. The older buildings in the area show similarities in composition and materials to 1515 Clay Street in that they are 3 part vertical compositions with no setbacks and are faced in brick with terra cotta decorative ornament embellishing the ground floor.

There are a number of surface level parking lots and several recently constructed multi-level parking lots in the area. 1515 Clay is two blocks west of Broadway, the main commercial and retail street in downtown Oakland, and one block west of San Pablo Avenue, another important commercial and traffic artery in Oakland. 1515 Clay Street is also one block from the City Center Project (starting south of 14th Street), a large redevelopment project consisting of highrise offices and a variety of retail uses.

### **PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION**

#### **A. Original Architectural Drawings**

Original construction drawings and remodeling drawings for 1515 Clay Street are in the archives of the Development Services Department, City of Oakland, One City Hall Plaza, Oakland, CA. The plans for the annex have been not been located.

#### **B. Early Views**

A photo dating from the 1920s of the Clay Street elevation partially obstructed by Oakland City Hall, but with the Breuner's store sign visible, is in the photo collection of the Oakland Museum History Department, 1000 Oak Street, Oakland, CA (photo # 57A). There are also two early street views in the collection of the corner of Clay and 15th Street when the building site was a parking lot (photos #222 and #670). None of these photo are in the public domain, and thus are not included with this documentation.

#### **C. Interviews**

Stanley Johnson, grandson of Walter Mathews, December 3, 1990. Stanley Johnson, 66 Brushwood Lane, San Rafael, CA.

D. Bibliography

1. Primary and unpublished sources:

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#### **PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION**

This Historic American Buildings Survey documentation of the John Breuner and Company Building was undertaken in accordance with a Memorandum of Agreement among the U.S. General Services Administration, the State Historic Preservation Office and the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation. The contract work for the project was performed by Page & Turnbull, Inc., 364 Bush Street, San Francisco, Ca 94104; project manager was Jack Schafer.

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